**How to Write Descriptively**

Mark Twain, one of America’s most distinguished authors, wrote the descriptive paragraph below. Read the paragraph carefully. Does the paragraph offer a *good* description? *Fair* description? *Poor* description? Jot down your reasons for your answers briefly at the bottom of the paragraph.

[ Published in Harper’s Magazine for January and February, 1902.]

It was a crisp and spicy morning in early October. The lilacs and laburnums, lit with the glory-fires of autumn, hung burning and flashing in the upper air, a fairy bridge provided by kind nature for the wingless wild things that have their home in the tree-tops and would visit together; the larch and the pomegranate flung their purple and yellow flames in brilliant broad splashes along the slanting sweep of woodland, the sensuous fragrance of innumerable deciduous flowers rose upon the swooning atmosphere, far in the empty sky a solitary oesophagus slept upon motionless wing; everywhere brooded stillness, serenity, and the peace of God.

Definitions and Questions:

Lilacs: bloom only in early spring. In fall, the bushes are a dusky green.

Laburnum: a Furasion variety of poisonous tree or shrub, not common in the

northeastern United States.

“hung burning and flashing”: how do plants hang on air? Which way up do they hang? A flash is sudden and abrupt. How is air “brilliant”? How is it “dull”?

“Wingless wild things”: what is this? Monkeys? Squirrels?

A bridge over “hanging” plants?

Larch: commonly called tamarack or hackmatack in New England; has short, pine like leaves in bunches, generally a bluish-green color.

Pomegranates: usually found in hot, arid regions of the Near East, though they are occasionally cultivated in the southern Unites Sates. Leaves are bright green. The plant has orange-red flowers, with red berries. “purple and yellow flames”?

“fling a flame”: How? Left Handed? Lobbed? In splashes? How do you fling a flame that splashes?

Deciduous flowers: all flowers are deciduous; this is redundant.

Swoon: this is a fainting fit or attack.

pharynx: the part of the alimentary canal between the mouth cavity and the esophagus. What is it doing in the sky?

empyrean: the highest heaven.

brooded: to brood is to dwell continuously and moodily on a

subject. Does: “serenity” brood? Does stillness brood?

Clearly the passage is nonsense. Mark Twain wrote it for a young would be writer friend as nonsense to show that what may sound impressive or artistic can often be meaningless. So the paragraph is a spoof.

“the paragraph was most ably constructed for the deception it was intended to put upon the reader. It was my intention that it should read plausibly, and it is now plain that it does; it was my intention that it should be emotional and touching… and the paragraph would have slidden through every reader’s sensibilities like oil and left not a suspicion behind.”